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SUBJECT: CANADIAN OPINION LEADERS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT NEW  
U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TONE BUT LOOKING FOR ACTION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Canadians have noted a new tone in U.S. foreign policy and have responded enthusiastically, according to a group of Canadian opinion leaders who met with the Charge on August 13. They praised the Secretary's recent Council on Foreign Relations speech and commented the new rhetoric from the administration has built an enormous reservoir of Canadian good will. However, they see less new substance in the specific policy proposals in the Secretary's speech, and find many policy statements by the new administration to be consistent with those of the Bush Administration. They commented that most Canadians will be looking closely to see whether the U.S. change in tone is matched by action. Some expressed concern that the U.S. is too consumed with domestic priorities at present to exert sustained global leadership. Despite continued Obama-mania in Canada, Canadians overwhelmingly believe their own leaders should resist any U.S. request to extend Canada's combat role in Afghanistan. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Charge d'Affaires hosted nine national opinion leaders on August 13 for discussion of the new administration's foreign policy direction, drawing particular attention to the Secretary's recent speech to the Council on Foreign Relations. The participants, all of whom are high profile international affairs commentators, offered uniformly strong praise for the new administration's changed tone compared with the Bush administration. They singled out for special praise the new rhetorical emphasis on multilateral consultation, the use of international institutions, and increased consultation and coordination with allies. One national columnist said, "It was hugely important for Canadians to set a new tone. You can't underestimate that because (President Bush's rhetoric of) 'for us or against us' and 'wanted: dead or alive' went over very badly in Canada." Many also gave strong praise to President Obama's Cairo speech, noting that it was "widely and favorably noted in Canada."

¶3. (SBU) While highly enthusiastic about the good will and intentions expressed by the new Administration, many observed that they found nothing "really new" in Secretary Clinton's speech. Others contrasted the speech's claim to a bold new direction with the many policy continuities with the Bush administration or its "incrementalism" where it does strike a new direction. One academic commented that new administration had talked a great deal about climate change and energy security, but that "Canadians are waiting to see some sort of new agenda, rather than a re-hashing of old problems." In lamenting that the new administration seems to be "writing off everything associated with the Bush administration," one guest asked "Why has the Millennium Challenge Corporation gone so far off the radar?" U.S. public diplomacy on the importance of robust diplomatic and development engagement has penetrated into Canadian consciousness, according to many attendees, who commented that "U.S. diplomacy seems to be 'back' and well resourced." One criticized the speech for having "very little substance"

in references to development issues.

¶4. (SBU) Iraq was a central topic of discussion among the group. One academic asked whether the U.S. can achieve a "stable political system" in a country that is "very fragile with lots of unresolved issues." He questioned whether the U.S. and Iraqis can "reconcile those significant fractures to allow the U.S. to stay out." He noted the "confident" references in the Secretary's speech about U.S. withdrawal and said, "I don't understand where that confidence comes from." Another noted that the U.S. drawdown is "clearly diminishing the U.S. ability to influence events in Iraq." Another wondered whether the U.S. timetable for withdrawal is "a real one or a negotiating tool." A pollster commented that Canadians feel a "collective sense of Schadenfreude" about their country's decision to defy the U.S. on the invasion of Iraq, believing that "We got that one right and you got it wrong." He underlined that experience is coloring Canadian views of Afghanistan, with the majority of the public believing that the international community is unlikely to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan, as it failed to do in Iraq.

¶5. (SBU) Most participants expressed a keen desire to understand better what the Secretary means by a "new global architecture." One said, "The Secretary talks about engaging allies, but what does that mean concretely for the North and the South?" All participants noticed the lack of references to Canada, Western Europe, or any Western Hemisphere countries -- except Brazil. One said that the Secretary seemed to be "writing off everything except Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. You seem to have forgotten Africa

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and Latin America." Another chimed in that "the Millennium Development Goals seem to have been sacrificed to the war on terror." Another questioned whether the U.S. will "truly take into account the views of others or whether it will continue to be a 'G-1.'" Another opined that "We've heard this tune before from another Clinton, and it all came to naught."

¶6. (SBU) An academic commented that "during the Bush years, Canadians came to question U.S. values and competency;" now "they no longer question whether the U.S. is leading for the right reasons...(but) ... the question remains whether the U.S. can change the perception of its competence, especially when it is taking on so much on so many fronts," including important U.S. domestic priorities in economic recovery and health care reform. Several agreed that they had been seeking in the speech some recognition by U.S. officials that "the world is expecting it to deliver" results. One claimed to have found only "a little acknowledgment" of that need.

¶7. (SBU) Another argued, in contrast, that while the Secretary's rhetoric is "recycled," the administration's actions are "bold and wise, especially as related to Latin America." He noted that the U.S. "measured reactions" to events in El Salvador and Honduras are a stark contrast with past Republican rhetoric and actions, notwithstanding the Bush administration's "very skillful handling of Chavez." He expressed regret that U.S. foreign policy "really has changed but you don't see that reflected in the words of the new administration." He praised the "new outreach to Cuba" as a "major change to be applauded."

¶8. (SBU) A pollster observed that Canadians had feared being overwhelmed by the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s. More lately, however, Canadians fear being shut out of the U.S. agenda. Canadians want to engage the U.S. and wonder if the U.S. recognizes the strong hand it has in Canadian public opinion. He noted that President Obama has a job approval rating consistently over 70 percent in Canada, which is more than double that of any Canadian politician. Another observed that Canada "needs a partner on the other side (of the

border) to be successful, and unfortunately, that partner has huge economic problems and trade preoccupations right now." The pollster cautioned that President Obama's vast popularity does not in and of itself translate automatically into approval for new U.S. foreign policy initiatives. He noted especially that 80 percent of Canadians consistently express the opinion that their own leaders should resist any Obama administration requests to extend Canada's combat role in Afghanistan.

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